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B. (B) LAGOS 2815

Classified by CDA Timothy Andrews for reasons 1.6X6.

11. (C) Summary: The 2001 Convention of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) elected an unopposed slate of national party leaders November 10. Yielding an outwardly harmonious convention, there was little sign of the wrangling and division that characterized the preceding four weeks of party congresses (Ref A). National Chairman Barnabas Gemade and Party Secretary Okwesilieze Nwodo, succumbing to a combination of pressure and promised emoluments, stepped down prior to the Convention. Conflicts in a dozen states at the ward, local government and state party congresses did not prevent the National Convention from moving forward. However, some egos were bruised, and certain questions remain open. Resolving these problems will be high on the agenda of Audu Ogbeh, the new Party Chairman, and Prince Vincent Eze Ogbulafor, National Secretary. Pre-convention internecine friction had contributed to a rise in the overall political temperature here. The atmosphere has now cooled somewhat thanks the orderly convention. Still, Ogbeh, faces a hard task. Ogbeh must rejuvenate a Party weakened by power plays and the President's often heavy-handed. His first steps, nullification of Party expulsions, may set a positive initial direction. Background on the PDP's first three years will be provided Septel. End Summary.

ATMOSPHERE

12. (U) The 2001 PDP Convention was a festive occasion, resembling more a reception for three thousand than a political convention. Apart from a dour one-sentence welcoming comment from outgoing National Chairman Barnabas Gemade, speakers were upbeat and inspirational--the crowd clearly thrilled to participate in the first PDP National Convention since November 1999. Obasanjo and Speaker Ghali Na'abba both appealed for Party unity, looked forward to another successful 18 months of PDP leadership, and predicted strong gains for the Party at all levels of government during the 2003 election cycle. Outside the venue, the throng of thousands of Nigerians clamoring around the chain-link fence was striking. They seemed to want at least to be physically near the often remote elites who are responsible for leading Nigeria, and who have disappointed them so often in the past. On more than one occasion, police were seen beating young men trying to sneak into the venue or who were accused of being one of the ubiquitous pickpockets trying to steal from the more affluent participants as they entered the conventions jam packed main gate. Meanwhile, away from the actual convention site, functionaries from the state and local levels crowded ministers' residences and the liaison offices of many states added to the celebrant atmosphere, many of the functionaries spent a lot of time consuming vast quantities of food and drink and leaving wrecked automobiles scattered about the city.

Changing Partners

13. (C) Observers within and outside the Party were perplexed by Gemade and Nwodo's stubborn bid to retain their positions in the face of Presidential opposition. (Gemade was installed during the 1999 Party Convention in Jos only at the President's behest, and due to the deep pockets of his political backers in the Party.) PDP contacts told us that both Gemade and Nwodo were promised ministerial positions to end their reelection bids. That they held on until nearly the eleventh hour caused many to suspect that their bid to remain was a desperate gambit to compel the President to

"sweeten" their severance packages. Party insiders told us that support for Gemade primarily came from PDP state governors who, either due to non-performance or conflicts with local power brokers, were unlikely to regain the party nomination. Senator Aniete Okon told Poloff, "Those guys know that with Gemade, they can buy the nomination; with Ogbeh, they can't."

14. (SBU) While it is typical for politicians here to engage in brinkmanship before resolving a conflict, both the President and Party officials considered Gemade's rebelliousness to have been out-of-bounds, even by Nigerian standards. Given other current events -- the violence in Benue state, and the dispute over electoral reform -- the PDP leadership squabble was untimely, increasing political tension at a moment when it was already high. In an attempt to save his position, Gemade called an October 30 meeting of the PDP National Executive Council and declared that the Convention and Party congresses were suspended, and that Minister of Works and Housing Anenih was expelled (Comment: This was ironic. It was Anenih, by doling out cash during the 1999 convention, who did the leg work that got Gemade his job. End comment.)

15. (C/NF) The following day, President Obasanjo called a meeting of the Party Caucus--PDP governors, National Assembly leaders, Party elders and key officials from the Executive. Neither Gemade nor Nwodo were present. The October 31 session undid Gemade's handiwork by moving to lift the court injunction against Party congresses, reinstate Anenih, and deciding to go ahead with the Party Convention as scheduled. Gemade feebly contested the authority of the Caucus to make those decisions, but the battle was over. President Obasanjo charged Deputy Senate President Ibrahim Mantu, a Middle Belt politician from Plateau state to "settle" Gemade, so that the convention would run smoothly. Mantu told the Charge that he had reiterated to Gemade the President's offer of a cabinet position in exchange for the PDP leadership, but added that he would wait until after the Convention to strongly advise Gemade not to accept. Gemade, Mantu noted, had proven untrustworthy and would not be tolerated as a colleague in the cabinet.

A NEW HAND AT THE WHEEL

16. (C) Retired from active political life since being Communications Minister under Shagari, New PDP chair Audu Ogbeh is respected, unlike his more slippery predecessor. During separate conversations with the Ambassador and the DCM prior to his gaining the chairmanship, Ogbeh spoke frankly about Nigeria's political and economic health. He castigated Nigerian elites for being self-serving and for abandoning their mostly rural fellow citizens to poverty and malaise. He placed primary responsibility for the parlous economy on the elites -- both military and civilian -- who have ruled the country over the past 30 years, and drew an unequivocal connection between widespread poverty and the ethnic and religious strife that has become far too common during the Fourth Republic.

17. (C) If he lives up to his reputation, Ogbeh will be much better for the party than Gemade. There are signs he already is. His first step as Party Chairman was to nullify all previous expulsions from the Party in an attempt to instill unity in the PDP as it gears up for elections. Ogbeh will be a key player in resolving intra-party disputes between PDP office holders in different branches of government and between rival state Party factions. To do so effectively, he must not adopt Gemade's role as the President's spokesperson to the Party. Yet, it is unclear how Obasanjo, who is accustomed to having orders followed, will respond if Ogbeh begins to act independently. However, that Obasanjo wanted Ogbeh indicates recognition of the drawbacks of Gemade and those like him. Ogbeh (like Gemade from Benue State) is affable, low-key and appears capable of building consensus and brokering compromises among competing interests.

CONVENTION DAY: A FEW DISCORDANT NOTES

18. (U) Among Ogbeh's first challenges will be resolving disputes in the twelve states that failed to complete elections of state PDP executive committees because of irregularities at the ward, local government or state Party level(s). Some state Governors nullified outright the results of ward congresses, like Plateau Governor Dariye and

Abia Governor Orji Kalu (Ref. B). Others obeyed the Gemade-orchestrated court order barring local government congresses, and therefore were unable to conclude their state-level congress and elect delegates for the Convention. This unresolved factionalism produced the only bit of discord during a National Convention otherwise characterized by an almost festive parade of dignitaries pressing the flesh.

19. (U) At the Anambra State bleacher section, all seats were occupied by supporters of Chief Emeka Offor, the former patron but current adversary of Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju. Since Anambra did not complete the selection of delegates, Offor's supporters--including Anambra's entire National Assembly delegation--refused to permit Mbadinuju or his delegation to sit. A standoff (or more accurately, a sit still, ensued.) Both groups tried to out-chant the other. Offor's contingent was larger and louder, although he was installed in a seat by Mobile Police, Mbadinuju eventually abandoned his State's delegation, chased away by cries, in Igbo, of "Thief!" Other states facing bitter conflicts between incumbent governors and other party figures include Plateau, Cross River, and Abia. Several sources stated that President Obasanjo wants all South-South governors replaced, regardless of their party affiliation, because of their insistence on being paid the full constitutional derivation of 13 percent.

10. (C) Comment: The Convention was an anticlimax to several weeks of intramural tug of war in the party. While the PDP is far from fixed, at least it is still running. President Obasanjo accomplished his mission) an uneventful convention, and the selection of Chairman and national executive slate he wanted. The convention, although orderly, was neither very transparent nor democratic. Selection of party leaders was orchestrated from afar and not determined by an open process. This tack kept the convention from denigrating into an unruly affair, and as such, it,s probably a net positive. However, underlying problems and concerns about how the party is run and the relationship of the party leadership to the presidential remain. It is now up to the President and new party hierarchy to continue to mend today's wounds and, perhaps, shift the party to a more transparent and democratic tomorrow. Septel offers an overview of the evolution of the PDP over the past three years that places current events in context.

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